

TREATMENTS FOR EARLY ALZHEIMER'S

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Alzheimer's disease is a degenerative disease of the brain affecting between 5-10% of the population aged 65 and older. For many years, Alzheimer's was a progressive disorder for which there was no cure or effective treatment. However, in the last five years, three medications have become available.

The new medications are called cholinesterase inhibitors and are designed to increase the concentration of acetylcholine in the brain. This neurotransmitter, important for learning and memory, is deficient in the brains of people with Alzheimer's. These new drugs slow the breakdown of acetylcholine and thus increase the concentrations of this chemical in the brain.

The first drug to become available was tacrine (Cognex); it was not well tolerated by almost half the people who took it. Tacrine had to be taken four times a day, had serious side effects and was not as potent as the two drugs currently used to treat Alzheimer's disease.

The second medication to become available was donepezil (Aricept). More potent than tacrine, it can be taken once a day and is much better tolerated. About 80 % of those taking donepezil show improvement in memory and function.

The newest medication, rivastigmine (Exelon), became available in May 2000. Taken twice a day with meals, it appears to be well tolerated when the dose is gradually increased. >

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These medications have been shown to improve thinking and the quality of life for both patient and caregiver. Our experience suggests that improvement in cognition is not dramatic and that the greatest benefit may be in slowing Alzheimer's progression. As it slows, these medications often reduce the need for nursing home care. Since the first months or years of nursing home care are usually paid for by families, these medications have the potential to save families substantial amounts of money which can be spent on services at home.

Standard therapy for Alzheimer's disease now includes the cholinesterase inhibitors often combined with Vitamin E which has also been shown to slow the progression of the disease and reduce the need for nursing home care.

Newer therapies being developed include a vaccine to reduce amyloid plaques in the brains of experimental mice. Amyloid is a protein which accumulates in the brains of persons with Alzheimer's and is believed to play a major role in the development of the disease. Early trials in humans suggest the vaccine is well tolerated. Whether this vaccine can eliminate the amyloid and result in improved cognition is unknown.

There have been dramatic advances in understanding this disease; the new medications are not wonder drugs but they represent hope where there was none just a few years ago. Early diagnosis of Alzheimer's and treatment with these medications can help maintain quality of life for longer periods.

For more information, contact the Wisconsin Alzheimer's Association chapter in your area (see phone book or call your county aging unit for address). The chapters and memory diagnostic centers are on the internet at: www.wisc.edu/dementia.